

P.R.E.S.E.N.C.E.



## Spirituality, Interview by Marcel Dumestre, Ed.D.

An Interview with Thomas Berry

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The Thomas Berry Project  
Loyola Institute for Ministry • Loyola University New Orleans

### Interview Engagement Guide

Developed by Carol Lenox  
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#### *Overview*

In this interview, Thomas Berry describes spirituality as rooted in the Divine presence revealed throughout the natural world—the universe itself as the primary revelation of God. He calls for a renewed cosmological spirituality, one that recognizes the universe as the “primary liturgy” and celebrates the great moments of creation as “moments of grace.” He also emphasizes the sacredness of cultural diversity as a reflection of the universe’s own law of differentiation. Ultimately, he envisions a Christian spirituality that rediscovers the “cosmic Christ,” seeing the divine present not only in the Eucharist but in all of creation, and calls this rediscovery essential for healing our relationship with the Earth.

#### *Transcript*

**Thomas:** Spirituality, in my view of the universe, would have to be based on the sense of the Divine as manifested throughout the entire natural world. This, I think, is the world, the locus for the meeting of the human and Divine. It's in the natural world. It's where the Divine manifests itself primarily, and St. Thomas tells us that the cosmological order, or the order of the universe, as he expresses it, is the ultimate and most magnificent expression of the Divine in the phenomenal world. And it's the purpose and end of all things in the universe is the universe. And this is given to us through the... Genesis when the Divine says of each day that it's good then, at the end of the six days, God looks over the creation and says, "It's very good." Well, that has traditionally been interpreted as indicating that the universe in its vastness and its unity is the supreme manifestation of the Divine and we participate in that.

**Marcel:** How do we get in touch with the universe in having a sense of spirituality?

**Thomas:** We get in touch with the universe and establish our spirituality in relationship to the air we breathe, the sun and the light, and the trees and the forest and the streams. Of course, in our times, that's one of the great difficulties of spirituality, is that we don't have these primary experiences. And so we have to develop our spirituality more in a human context, where we see the Divine in each other. We see the Divine in more human terms and through human agencies. but that's not really adequate. We need the universe just like we need to breathe. And our spirituality is good, should come with our breathing. It should come with our hearing of the song of birds. It should— with children and chasing butterflies, or running over the land, or wading in a stream. There are all these phenomena that children just desire so deeply. They long for these experiences, and in having these experiences, they are awakened to the deep mystery of things, the deep mystery of the universe, so that to be taken away from these things and put in the world of wires and wheels and concrete and steel and machines and the noise of electronics and all that, it's to damage their whole psychic system. it's to damage their whole spirituality.

**Marcel:** Has our spiritual traditions taken us away, our spirituality away, from the universe?

**Thomas:** It might be said that our spiritualities have taken us away from these things because the natural world has been presented to us by scientists as secular, as mechanistic, as meaningless, and so a whole distorted view of the universe has come into being, and we've been blocked from the immediacy of our experience of the Divine.

Now, one of the things that I think could be done as regards to spirituality is develop a new sense of liturgy. Primarily, all human liturgies are ways of connecting the human with the liturgy of the universe. So the universe is the primary liturgy. Now, as we know the universe now through a sequence of irreversible transformations whereby the world as we know it has come into being, we need to celebrate what I call the moments of grace, the great transformation moments that brought our world into being, the moment of grace when the earth took shape, the earth, the garden, planet, or the universe. As far as we know, originally it was the same as the other planets, but Mars turned to rock, Jupiter remained fiery gases, Only the earth had that special grace that it was the right distance from the Sun. It was the right size, right distance from the moon, and so forth, that enabled it to stay alive, to produce water and air, to produce cells and living beings and the animals that roam over the land, and the beauty —the million-fold beauty that we see about us. Now all of that is a moment of grace. We should celebrate liturgically the coming of the flowers. We use flowers in our liturgies, but just think when there were no flowers, and then there were flowers. Stupendous moments. Stupendous grace moments. Stupendous revelatory moments. And so we need our cosmological moments of grace before we can have historical moments of grace or our religious moments of grace as we think.

**Marcel:** That's great. If we can switch to culture a bit. In our program, we talk about the importance of getting in touch with the culture of the people that we're working with, and it's been a blind spot for us. We tend to think of our culture of origin as everyone else having the same notions of what's right and wrong and how we do things. How do we keep that creative tension in really knowing where people are in their own culture cultural situation —why things are happening the way that they are in their culture— and at the same time helping them to see the limitations of that culture? So I guess two prongs: being aware of the culture and all of these forces that are shaping what we do and why we do it.

**Thomas:** One of the things about the human is that whereas the genetic coding fashions the total life program of the pre-human order, of the human order, we're genetically mandated to invent ourselves in

a very special way. More than any other being, we invent ourselves. That is, for instance, we're genetically coded to think. We don't have a choice to think or not to think. We do have a choice of how we think, and what we think, and how we use our thinking. And this enables a human to develop a great diversity of cultures because humans need to be taught. Language is a human invention, but we have to have a long childhood in order to learn language, in order to learn the culture, in order to learn the social mores, in order to learn human conduct to be truly humanized. And we're truly humanized in diversity of expression. It's the law of the universe, the basic biological law. It's diversity. Is there going to be cultures? It's going to be different. Is there going to be flowers? They're going to be different. There are trees? It's going to be different. If there are religions? They're going to be different. And so we have to understand that at the human level, the great beauty of it is diversity of cultural articulations. So that's one of the main things that we have, and so in spiritualities and religions, too, this is going to be articulated differently in a different cultural context. Now, at the present time, there is one of the great difficulties of appreciating the way in which cultures enrich each other. If cultures were not different, we couldn't enrich each other. Just like if we were not different personally, we couldn't help each other. It's because we're different that we are needed by each other. Cultures need each other because they're different. And that's the purpose of the difference, is to enrich each of the component members that meet each other.

One of the difficulties of spirituality in our times is the tendency of many people or the attraction of many people to the natural world, and a large number of people are abandoning traditional Christian spirituality for this type of experience. It seems to mean something to them, and they seem to get something from that that they're not getting in church, and it seems to me that this is, in some ways, a very sound movement, that is, the movement back to the experience, the exalted experience, that comes from contact with the basic forces of nature, with the natural life expression, and the song of birds, the flowing of rivers, and the excitement of the mountains, and the stars at night, and all this. Well, this does not need to be considered as not Christian. One of the things about St. Paul was his effort to insist that in Christ all things hold together. He was not satisfied with a Jesus that was simply a manifestation of the Divine and an individual human person. That individual person had to be a cosmological, have a cosmological dimension. So with St. John in his prologue, he says, "In the beginning was the Word," and all things were made, and without him was made nothing that has been made. Now, this refers to the Christ mode of the universe, or the cosmic mode of the Christ reality. So, there is what might be called the cosmic Christ; it's frequently referred to as the cosmic dimension of the Christ reality. And I think myself that the devastation of the planet Earth is the way in which the passion is being lived out in our times, the devastation of the natural world, because there's a Christ-Earth equation that needs to be considered. So for Christians, this finding of an exalted spiritual experience in the natural world can also be a Christ experience. It can be an immensely fruitful experience of the Divine, and it translates very quickly, in Saint Paul's term, into a mode of Christ's presence, so that Christ is not present simply in the Eucharist; Christ is even more present in the universe. That's more primary than the Eucharist, and even the bread of the Eucharist, where does it come from? It comes from the earth. The earth produces that. And Christ has to be present in the grain before he's present in the bread. So, it's a different mode of presence, and it's a mode of presence that we don't think about. And at first, we associate with the secular world because we've abandoned the natural world. Christians have abandoned the natural world, and any sound spirituality at the present time will take us back into the natural world, back into that mode of the Christ reality.

To the question of whether or not there are any good examples of civilizations that have had an integral relationship to the natural world, I would say it's not easy to find them. The human record is not good after the civilizational process is started. Even back in the Neolithic, even with China, we find a very complex situation. That is, China developed the most wonderful sense of how humans are related to the cosmological order, to the natural systems, but in actual practice, they devastated their continent. They started cutting down trees, they were an agricultural people, and that never stopped. Now, as far as I know, the best record would be the Inca of South America. They had a wonderful record of terracing and replenishing the soil. The Mayan people on this continent probably disintegrated because of what happened to their soil. The soils were apparently—lost their fertility, and so, the Maya died out, possibly to some extent because of what happened to their soil. In North Africa, there was a great tragedy there, and over the centuries, in the sense that it was once a very fertile land, but it became eroded; the soils were washed in the Mediterranean. So, it's a very difficult thing to find a civilization that has established a good approach to the natural world. But the West, particularly in modern times, is so terrible and so devastating and the ultimate destructive force because it is so powerful, because it is so historically driven, because it is so determined to take the planet to pieces and build a different world because it is not accepting the natural world; it does not want to live within the limits of life as given to us, and it's determined to take the planet to pieces and attempt a better world, although we are obviously incapable of making a better world. One of the things about the human is that whereas the genetic coding fashions the total life program of the pre-human order, of the human order, we're genetically mandated to invent ourselves in a very special way. More than any other being, we invent ourselves. That is, for instance, we're genetically coded to think. We don't have a choice to think or not to think. We do have a choice of how we think, and what we think, and how we use our thinking. And this enables a human to develop a great diversity of cultures because humans need to be taught. Language is a human invention, but we have to have a long childhood in order to learn language, in order to learn the culture, in order to learn the social mores, in order to learn human conduct to be truly humanized. And we're truly humanized in diversity of expression. It's the law of the universe, the basic biological law. It's diversity. Is there going to be cultures? It's going to be different. Is there going to be flowers? They're going to be different. There are trees? It's going to be different. If there are religions? They're going to be different. And so we have to understand that at the human level, the great beauty of it is diversity of cultural articulations. So that's one of the main things that we have, and so in spiritualities and religions, too, this is going to be articulated differently in a different cultural context. Now, at the present time, there is one of the great difficulties of appreciating the way in which cultures enrich each other. If cultures were not different, we couldn't enrich each other. Just like if we were not different personally, we couldn't help each other. It's because we're different that we are needed by each other. Cultures need each other because they're different. And that's the purpose of the difference, is to enrich each of the component members that meet each other.

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### ***Discussion/Reflection Questions***

1. Berry suggests that "the universe in its vastness and its unity is the supreme manifestation of the divine." How might this view reshape traditional theological understandings of where and how we encounter God?

2. Berry argues that Christ is “even more present in the universe” than in the Eucharist, since the bread itself comes from the Earth. How does this perspective expand or challenge conventional Christian sacramental theology?
3. Reflect on Berry’s idea that diversity—of species, cultures, and religions—is the law of the universe. How might recognizing this cosmic diversity transform the way you see other cultures, faiths, and even your own spiritual path?

### ***Journaling Prompts***

1. How does viewing our encounters with the natural world—its beauty, vitality, and mystery—as experiences of Christ’s presence invite us to reimagine what it means to live a truly incarnational faith?
2. Berry speaks of “cosmological moments of grace” such as the coming of flowers or the birth of the Earth itself. What natural moment or transformation feels sacred to you, and how might you celebrate it as part of your own spiritual practice?

### ***Meditation/Prayer Practice***

Spend some time in quiet prayer and contemplation around one of the following:

*“Devastation of the planet Earth is the way in which the Passion is being lived out in our times.”*

*“Any sound spirituality at the present time will take us back into the natural world.”*

Take a moment to write down any thoughts, questions, or new understandings that came to you.